

THE NEW ARK

Ronald Johnson, *ARK*. Ed. Peter O'Leary. Flood Editions, 2013.

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In the Afterword to his long poem *ARK*, Ronald Johnson names the poets whose “shipwrecks” lay before him as he wrote: Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson. But Johnson, with typical insouciance, tells us he was “undeterred.” As he explains, “If my confreres wanted to write a work with all history in its maw, I wished, from the beginning, to start all over again, attempting to know nothing but a will to create, and matter at hand. William Blake would be a guiding spirit...” (311). I suspect that Blake is invoked not only for his absolute freshness of vision, but because of his famous declaration, which he puts in the mouth of Los in *Jerusalem*: “I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.” It is a paradox that no reader of *ARK* can avoid: like Blake, Johnson feels his business is to create, which means tapping into a perpetual stream of invention. But for Johnson, invention also means a careful engagement with the past, and especially with the tradition of the American long poem beginning with Whitman—not necessarily an anxiety of influence (on the surface, Johnson appears to be one of the least anxious of recent poets) but surely an opening to influence, to “the Voices” that call to him not only from beyond, but from behind. And again like Blake, Johnson looks somewhat uneasily behind him at his precursors (note that he democratically equalizes them all by calling them “confreres”), while at the same time he gazes at a remote horizon toward which one moves only through pure, self-inspired energy and the unbounded spirit of delight. In Johnson’s masterpiece, the result of this magical tension, or as he puts in *ARK* 72, this “legerdemain in the Laboratory” (225), is an astounding panoply of forms coming from a *laboratory* where the poet conducts his experiments in verbal *elaboration*. And now, once more, these forms are here for us to behold, but with some significant differences. What the poet calls, in *ARK* 81, his “good ship *Praxis*” (253) has been refurbished and launched again into the readerly sea.

The new edition of *ARK* is lovingly edited by Johnson’s literary executor, the poet and critic Peter O’Leary, beautifully designed and produced by Jeff Clark of the Quemadura bookmaking studio, and published by Flood Editions. Flood has also given us Johnson’s late work, *The Shrubberies*, as well as a new edition of *Radi Os*, Johnson’s visionary poem composed by

“writing through” Books I-IV of *Paradise Lost*. More volumes are planned. Johnson (1935-1998) worked on *ARK* for twenty years, beginning in 1970 and completing the final section on New Year’s Eve, 1990. Over that time, his blueprint changed relatively little and was realized with extraordinary determination. The poem is in three books with a total of ninety-nine sections. Thirty-three Beams make up The Foundations, thirty-three Spires rise above them, and thirty-three Arches constitute the surrounding Ramparts. Time as well as space is structured, since the first book moves from sunrise to noon, the second from noon to sunset, the third through the “night of the soul” (312-313) until the great “Lift Off” (307) of the following dawn, with which the poem concludes. *ARK* was originally published by Living Batch Press in a paperback edition in 1996, its front cover decorated with a photo of the Watts Towers, one of the sculptural environments made by “outsider” artists which are emblematic of Johnson’s aesthetic. The formal inventiveness of the poem (parts of which had appeared in separate volumes beginning in 1980) could certainly be seen in the Living Batch edition, but as a devoted reader of Johnson, I always thought that the visual aspects of the poem and its self-consciousness as constructed artifact could have been better served. Still, it was wonderful to have it, and it went out of print all too soon.

The new edition, therefore, is all the more important. Its white cloth cover, with the title stamped in black in two fonts (A and R in a serif font, K in sans-serif), bears a black slip cover on the rear with the fonts reversed (A in sans-serif, R and K in serif). Below is a quote from Guy Davenport, one of Johnson’s earliest and most perceptive readers. Holding the volume in one’s hands before opening it, the overall effect is a sort of auspicious restraint: this, declares the object, is a *book*, to be embraced in its materiality, but it is also a *scripture*, so be prepared to plumb the depths and climb the heights. As Davenport notes, “It is for those who can see visions, and for those who know how to look well and be taught that they can see them.” Readers familiar with the first edition will be surprised when they do open the volume: the font is a clean, Art Deco-like sans-serif font, and the poem seems to have a great deal more room to breathe. O’Leary notes that “Previous editions of the poem vary the leading to reflect single- and double-spacing in Johnson’s typescript. However, for greater legibility, this edition adopts a basic leading that is uniform” (vii). This may sound like a mere technicality of book design, but with a work like *ARK*, by an author who also writes concrete poetry and who insists early in the work that “The eye may be said to be sun in other form” (12), it is anything but. What we can now *see* in the new edition is, indeed, the power and scope of the poem’s

visual design. I would not go so far as to say that *ARK* is entirely a concrete poem (parts of it certainly are), but the visualization of an ideal architecture is fundamental to Johnson's conception and method of composition. By standardizing the leading in the poem, the new edition resolves the complicated ideas and unfortunate misconceptions that a number of mid-twentieth century poets have about typewriters, scoring poetry, and the visual space on the page, matters which become even more troublesome when the work goes from typescript to print. Most importantly, in the new *ARK*, Johnson's stanza structures stand forth with far greater clarity and integrity. In a recent thread on Facebook (12 Nov. 2013) in which a number of Johnson enthusiasts were discussing the new edition, the poet and critic Ben Friedlander made an illuminating comparison between earlier editions of the poem and the new one: "But those always felt to me like books containing a poem that imagined itself to be architecture, whereas this one feels like the architecture of a poem in the form of a book."

But what exactly does this mean? After all, when Johnson tells us that as an "architecture, *ARK* is fitted together with shards of language, in a kind of cement of music" (312), he is being metaphorical. Yes, the placement of various arrangements of words in a given section of *ARK* (for instance, the concrete passages in Beams 5 [16], 27 [73], and 29 [78]) could be said to resemble, or function like, the broken pieces of tiles and bottles that Simon Rodia stuccoed to the surfaces of the Watts Towers. Likewise, Johnson's verbal music is masterful, and could be understood as cementing the words of the poem, though it may be more accurate to say that the words produce the music, and not the other way around. I choose a passage from *ARK* 73, more or less at random:

Sound they about us:
dusks' every thrust athrob together
at syrinx split infinities

rained down in daily radiance, no
never did hoedown jamboree
so strum flesh harp

rung out but harbinger of
believe, believe, be Live above!
& bluegrass all about

globe consuming itself, say
 brain by spinal Chord
 to pierce new universe thrice on
 (228)

As is true of Louis Zukofsky, Johnson's late style foregrounds a dense play of vowels and consonants, a "music" that signifies in and of itself, and perhaps to a greater extent than any one thing or idea signified. Meaning in poetry of this sort is overdetermined, though in an initial reading, one may sometimes find the determination of any meaning quite challenging. In other words, the pleasures Johnson has to offer are difficult pleasures, despite, or perhaps because of, their intense verbal sensuality. In the passage quoted above, Johnson typically conflates sight and sound. It is dusk (recall that the third book of the poem goes from sunset to dawn) and the poet is reminded of how the setting sun's light "rained down in daily radiance." Yet the light is also experienced as a "thrust athrob together / at syrinx split infinities." Syrinx is the nymph who is transformed into a reed when pursued by the aroused Pan. From the reed, the god makes his pan pipes, creating music out of his thwarted desire, a throbbing music of "split infinities." In a typically folksy gesture, Johnson compares Pan's music to a "hoedown jamboree," and it is then implicitly contrasted in the phrase "so strum flesh harp" to the harp music of Apollo, Pan's great rival, and the god of the sun. Pan's music is the sound of natural desire; Apollo's is that of spiritual transcendence—"believe, believe, be Live above!" Such cosmic tensions lead to the "globe consuming itself, say / brain by spinal Chord / to pierce new universe thrice on." The material globe or the human brain is consumed by the "spinal Chord," a typical Johnsonian pun. In *ARK* meaning—and spirit—move continually from immanence to transcendence and back again, and language—both music and vision—is its instrument.

As I hope I have demonstrated with this one brief example, the polysemic language of *ARK* opens itself at all points to extended commentary, commentary that calls for a finely-tuned ear, a sensitive eye, and a breadth of cultural knowledge that includes myth, music (Ives is crucial), the visual arts (*ARK 75* is drawn from the letters of Vincent Van Gogh), and, of course, literature. Be that as it may, the poem wears its cloak of allusions lightly; it is invitingly, some might say naively, democratic, celebrating, in the critic Eric Selinger's words, an "exuberant Americana";¹ and it has the charm one would expect of a poem seeking "To do as Adam did"—that is, to be an

1. Eric Murphy Selinger, "ARK as a Garden of Revelation," *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*, ed. Joel Bettridge and Eric Murphy Selinger (National Poetry Foundation, 2008), 330.

original namer—and to “build a Garden of the brain” (83). Selinger writes of Johnson’s “utopian patriotism,”² and as I have argued on a number of previous occasions, there are few recent poets more imbued with a utopian sensibility. Utopian thought always depends upon a vision of primal origins: it seeks to reestablish an unfallen state of things, a return to the Garden and, as Johnson puts it, “the body of light” (85), even as it imagines the new form of a perfected world that never has been. The poet tells us that the controlling myth in *ARK* is that of Orpheus and Euridice, “the blessed argument between poet and muse” (313), codified when Johnson read Elizabeth Sewell’s *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History* (1960). But I have always believed that in addition to Orpheus, the doomed cosmic singer, Johnson’s poem is also determined by another myth to which he frequently alludes, the kabbalistic myth of Adam Kadmon, the cosmic man whose body is the universe, and whose fall anticipates that of the biblical Adam. Or as Johnson puts it in Beam 10, the shortest section of *ARK*, “*daimon* diamond Monad I / Adam Kadmon in the sky” (30). Blake seeks to restore the wholeness of this figure in England’s green and pleasant land; Whitman makes it into the celebratory centerpiece of his American identity; Johnson gladly inherits the task.

Johnson’s prelapsarian inclinations, simultaneously redemptive and utopian, not only link him to the tradition of the long visionary poem, but, as I mentioned above, to various self-taught makers of fantastic, visionary sculptural environments. The works of such figures as Simon Rodia, le Facteur Cheval, Raymond Isidore, and James Hampton serve as formal and thematic models for the enormous verbal construction that is *ARK*. As Johnson explains in the Afterword, a turning point in the composition of the poem “was a visit to Le Facteur Cheval’s *Le Palais Ideal* in Hautrives, France. Cheval claimed that on his postman’s rounds he kicked a stone one day, then suddenly conceived the idea of building a palace ‘like a dream’. In one moment of vision he was Everyman who attempts creative quest” (311). In this context, we can see why Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes Johnson’s practice in *ARK* as “a continuous practice that declares itself in the continuing production of wonderful objects.”³ This remark responds to Johnson’s passage in Beam 28 of *ARK* on James Hampton’s masterpiece, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millenium General Assembly*, a dazzling assemblage of junk furniture and tinsel which Hampton constructed over many years in a garage in Washington, DC. (It is now in the Smithsonian

2. *Ibid.*, 30.

3. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Echological Scales: On *ARK* of Ronald Johnson,” in Bettridge and Selinger, 318.

Institute.) In the midst of Johnson's encomium for Hampton, the poet simply tells us that "He did not call himself an artist," a sentence which, as I see it, betrays a powerful longing on Johnson's part to achieve a state of original innocence, free from what we ordinarily think of as the aesthetic, which he perceives in figures like Hampton, and for which he in turn aspires in his poem.

But Johnson, despite his sympathies with the outsiders who created these works, is not a naïve or self-educated visionary; he *is* an artist, and a highly educated, sophisticated one at that. And it is at this point that readers of *ARK* will want to turn and reflect upon the function of such a work, "steeped in makeshift" (239) and yet "Exact as Ezekiel" (103) in the articulation of its spiritual wonders. Granted, those wonders are verbal objects, and the spirit is almost always immanent. But as the poet moves us steadily toward the transcendence of "Lift Off," we gradually realize that the "Elysian elision" (85) of this poem has designs upon us that are other than, or at least additional to, the aesthetic designs of, for lack of a better term, normative poetry (as in "normative religion"). *ARK* is what its author tells us Eden is: a "glossolalia of light." Listen. Behold. Read.⁴

4. For a further discussion of the spiritual dimension of *ARK*, see my *On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred In Contemporary American Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2010), 65-94.